



**International Commission on the  
Anthropology of Food and Nutrition**

## **Notes on Rice in Western European Food Cultures in General and Paella in Particular**

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Rice (*Oryza sativa*) perfectly reminds the subtlety of the relationships between our species and what we eat. Its role in the diet and its representation radically change according, not only to times or places, but also to socioeconomical contexts. In this short text, we will present some aspects of the fascinating and complex history and topicality of rice in Western Europe.

### **1. Rice in Western European Food Cultures**

#### **A) A second row protagonist?**

For the inhabitants of this region, rice is not the staple food that it is for over half of humanity. Its current contribution to their nutrition is low. That is a long-term trend. Present local levels of rice consumption are even the results of a few decades of gradual increase of rice eating. In 2015, Portuguese people were the largest European rice eaters, with an annual consumption around 22.9 kg per person of paddy rice – read: a significantly lower quantity of white rice. They were followed by the Spaniards (12.1 kg per person), the Belgians (9.58 kg per person) and the Italians (8.84 kg per person). Such quantities were small or even negligible in comparison with the quantities of wheat and potatoes they consumed over the same period or with the quantity of rice consumed in countries where rice was a staple food: 266 kg per person in Bangladesh, 241 kg per person in Cambodia, 93.9 kg per person in Ivory Coast, 74.9 kg per person in Dominican Republic, etc. (FAO).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. <https://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#home>

However, rice is undeniably well integrated into current local food corpus. Even in the countries where it remains very little consumed, this grain became a well-known regular product. In the mid-1990s, Dutch people only ate around 2.4 kg of white rice equivalent per capita and per year. Nevertheless, this meant for numerous households eating rice at least once a week (Van Renselaar & Van Tilburg, 1995). Germany is still a small rice consumer – roughly 6.8 kg of paddy rice per capita in 2020 (FAO). But, the menus of local school cafeterias show that it is quite difficult to go to one of these places during a week without eating rice or seeing someone who is eating rice.

## B) Rice in European culinary systems

There is also a notable presence of rice in Western European culinary repertoires. To be relevant in a food landscape, a food does not necessarily have to be cooked and served daily. The most important thing is that people agree that it is valuable for some reason: its flavour, its degree of accessibility, its symbolical value, its culinary practicality, etc.

In most European countries, a few rice recipes have found their place in the daily making-something-to eat. From the 1950s onwards, the marketing of parboiled and, later, of precooked rices facilitated the introduction of this grain to the ingredients of the simplest national cuisine in the places where it was mainly eaten in boiled form. In 1960, Robert J. Courtine could already write in *Nouveau Larousse Gastronomique*: “People say that Frenchmen do not know how cooking rice. [...] they frequently served a kind of mash that can suit as *entremets*, but not as vegetable side dish. These disadvantages have now vanished for the housekeeper, with American pre-treated long grain rices”.

Rice is also the main ingredient of emblematic dishes. Some of them are internationally famous gourmet monuments, others are more locally known and appreciated. In Spain, for example, there are the *Paella valenciana* that was recognised as an Intangible Good of Cultural Interest in October 2021 (Decree 176/2021, *Diario Oficial de la Generalitat Valenciana*) and a lot of other heritage recipes: *Perol cordobés* [soupy rice with vegetables and meat, Figure 1], *Caldero murciano* [soupy rice with fishes], *Arros amb fesols i naps* [creamy rice with beans, turnips and pork], *Morcilla de Burgos* [black pudding made with rice], the numerous Catalan and Valencian rice dishes, etc. In Portugal, we find among many other formulas: *Arroz de pato* [baked rice with duck meat and smoked sausage], *Arroz de polvo* [soupy rice with octopus] or *Arroz doce* [sweet rice pudding]. In Italy, there are numerous variants of the famous creamy *Risotto*, *Arancini* [stuffed rice balls], *Minestra de riso* [vegetable and rice soup], etc. Nowadays, it is possible to identify at least one important rice dish in the national culinary repertory of most Western European countries.

Their histories are, of course, more or less long and complex. Some of them have their origins in the evolution of an ancient local art of cooking with imported rice, others are linked with a colonial past or with the reception of immigrant populations. But each one of these recipes demonstrates the existence of a certain familiarity with this grain: *Kedgeree* [curried rice with smoked fish] and *Rice pudding* in United Kingdom; *Blanke dorèye* [rice tart] in Belgium; *Reissuppe* [rice soup] in Germany, *Urner rispor* [creamy rice with leek] and *Riz Casimir* [creamy curried rice with fruits and meat] in Switzerland; *Reisfleisch* [creamy rice with meat] in Austria; *Dolmadakia* [vine leaves stuffed with rice] in Greece, *Hrísgrjónagrautur* [rice porridge] in Iceland, etc.

Consumption of some emblematic rice dishes is strongly associated with a holiday celebration, accentuating their symbolical value. Danish *Risalamande* [rice porridge with almond and

vanilla], Swedish *Ris à la Malta* [rice porridge served with raspberry sauce] and Norwegian *Risengrynsgrøt* [rice porridge with cinnamon] are related to Christmastime. During the saint festival of Villava (Navarra, Spain), a local white pudding made with rice, lard, eggs and onions, called *Relleno navarro* is still highly valued [Figure 2].

Some rice dishes are also considered as perfect foods for association. It is the case of paella, and not just in Spain and in Southern France (where it became a local dish thanks to Spanish migrants and French citizens repatriated from Algeria). Chefs propose to organize festive meals around a paella show-cooking in Dublin, Edinburgh, Berlin, Warsaw, Budapest... On the other hand, cold rice salads became a classical picnic food in various countries.

### C) Rice in our popular representations

In contemporary European folk dietetics, representation of rice is broadly positive. In *El Balneario* (1986), Manuel Vázquez Montalbán played with the popular idea that boiled white rice was a much less caloric food than bread: “Nature seemed to him unworthy because it put 371 calories in 100 grams of rice, and raised 100 grams of the best appetizing bread, the crispy bread, to 380”. In 2004, for example, the inquiry *Indagine integrata sul consumo del riso in Italia* showed that rice was lighter, more digestible and more dietetic than pasta in the eyes of Italian people. Even if media coverage of scientific opinions on brown rice nutritional value complexified its folk representation, white rice is still regarded as “pure” food. Strongly associated with diets for sick and convalescent persons, rice is regularly presented as digestive and a key ingredient of miraculous detox/weight loss diets in magazines and other popular media.

### D) Rice in History...

The current relationships between European and rice are the results of a biocultural process in which society dynamics, geopolitical decisions, cultural choices, human physiological needs and biological characteristics of *Oryza sativa* interacted.

First contacts between Greek people and rice probably occurred during the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, when Macedonian troops entered territories where it was cultivated and consumed. Nothing indicates that they led to an immediate incorporation of this grain in Greek diet. The imprecision of the first local texts that referred to rice even suggests the opposite. First evidences that a part of Greek population consumed a small quantity of rice as medicine or food appeared under Roman domination. Apicius' *De re coquinaria* contains four recipes in which rice is used as a thickener. Galen observed that it was used to strengthen the stomach.

Globally, Roman physicians gave a strong dietary reputation to rice. Aulus Cornelius Celsus placed it on the lists of good juice foods and of foods that are best suited for the stomach, just after wheat and spelt. A satire by Horace reminds that rice decoction (*Ptisana oryzae*) was a well appreciated remedy for digestive problems. Archaeological data show that small quantities of imported rice circulated within Roman Empire to satisfy medicinal needs and upper-class culinary demand. For example, rice grains have been found in Croatia (Aelia Mursa, 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD) and in Germany (Novaesium, 1<sup>st</sup> century AD) (Spengler and alii, 2021).

During Middle Ages, rice remained an imported remedy and elite food in the largest part of Europe. Its trade progressively extended beyond the borders of the former Roman Empire. For example, there are evidences of rice consumption since at least the 14<sup>th</sup> century in Hanseatic Germany, in Denmark or in Sweden and since at least the 15<sup>th</sup> century in Poland or in Estonia

(Karg, 2007). Rice started to be successfully cultivated in a few South European small regions where favourable conditions to its development existed. During the Muslim domination on a part of Iberian Peninsula, rice cultivation became well established in the Guadalquivir marshes, Sevilla's Aljarafe, Valencia's Albufera, Granada coast, Murcia (Riera Melis, 2016), etc. There are evidences of rice cultivation in Tuscany and Lombardy from the last third of the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Lupotto and alii., 2021). Rice mainly remained an upper-class food in these growing areas. It was too good to export to lose its economic value.

In Early Modern Times, rice cultivation took more importance in Northern Italy and the Spanish Mediterranean area (Valencia, Catalonia). It was also introduced or developed in another regions: Calabria, Sicily, Bârzava floodplain, Alentejo (Jivulie and alii, 2016; Faísca and alii, 2021), etc. Until 1700, European-grown rice was sold in a continental market where there was little outside competition. But massive imports of rice from the North American British colonies changed things completely from the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup>. For example, during the period 1696-1700, 83.23 % of the rice imported into Great Britain came from Southern Europe and Atlantic Islands. Between 1711-1720, 94,79% of the rice imported into Great Britain already came from the Thirteen Colonies (Coclanis, 1993). “Carolina rice” became in all the rice importing countries a less expensive and less prestigious alternative to Mediterranean rices. This allowed a significant use of rice in hospital and charity house cuisines and, indirectly, led to a notable rice inclusion in the diet of lower-classes in some rice-growing regions. For example, this phenomenon occurred in Valencia area and played a major role in the creation of the *paella*. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Asian rices substituted Carolina one. But the clear difference between two rice consumer categories remained. On the one hand, those who ate rice because they wanted to do. Among them, the gourmets who enjoyed *Riz Pilaw*, *Riz à l'impératrice* and other rice dishes of the French high cuisine. On the other hand, those who ate rice because they had to do because their purchasing power did not allow them to access a more decent cereal food – a bread, even a low-quality one.

Within the framework of the society of plenty, differences in rice consumption did not disappear. In *La Distinction* (1979), Pierre Bourdieu wrote that “*riz au lait*” or “*riz au gras*” [“rather lower-class dishes”], “*riz au curry*” [“rather bourgeois”] and “*riz complet*” [brown rice “that is enough to describe a particular life style”] were hidden behind the word “rice”. In 2022, we can complete his list with basmati and other fashionable perfumed rices, with *Riz de Camargue*, *Arròs del Delta de l'Ebre*, *Riso di Baraggia Biellese e Vercellese*, *Arroz Carolino do Baixo Mondego* and the other European *terroir* rices under PDO and PGI, with organic or fairtrade rices, and, of course, with the rice for sushi.

## 2. A very short history of Paella

### A) Origins

Paella was born around the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, when rice started to be an important element of the rural lower classes in the Valencia area. This phenomenon was a consequence of decades of rice-growing development in the region and of a period of wheat market stress that led lower-classes to reducing their bread consumption.<sup>2</sup> By necessity, more low-income households

<sup>2</sup> We follow in this section some of the ideas we developed in Duhart and Medina, 2022.

adopted rice consumption. This fact implied specifically that they had to accommodate this cereal within their everyday cooking ingredients.

Rice recipes were not only created by women in their kitchen, but also by men in their outdoor workplaces. Valencian farm workers used to prepare breadcrumbs in a frying pan; in local language, they used to make “*migues*” in a “*paella*”. In the new food procurement environment, they replaced bread with rice in their *paella*. A new rice dish was born whose recipe differed from the older ones because the utensil needed for cooking it was not a saucepan, but a frying pan. Its name emphasized this important technical point: *Arroz en paella*, *Paella de arroz* or, more simply *Paella* [Figures 3 & 4].

The everyday farm worker’s paellas were very simple dishes. People who invented paella lived within a framework of food frustration: their workforce was their most precious capital, but their capacity to restore it by food ingestion was never absolutely sure; they ate rice, but they dreamt of bread; they glorified fresh meat, but they could not afford its regular consumption in sufficient quantity... Hearty food, the everyday paella brought them a response to their first concern. However, paella soon showed its adaptability. Fundamental dish of local outdoor cookery, it began to be associated, in a form enriched with the best meat product(s) possible, with *romerias* and other outdoor popular festive celebrations.

The next level of diversification of Valencian paella was when local elite adopted this low-class typical dish. Valencian paella reached this degree of complexity during the first half of the nineteenth century. Around 1850, local upper classes were not only interested in paella as a practical solution to their outdoor parties. They started to be proud of this food speciality. Even the most prestigious guests of the town were invited to eat paella on the bank of the Albufera lake. Valencian upper classes did not eat rice dishes out of necessity but because they wanted to do. Therefore, the ingredients of their paellas were selected in accordance with hedonistic principles. Paellas had to offer a combination of tasty and rich food. Logically, they were quite nourishing dishes. Valencian elite paella at that time frequently contained duck, chicken, pork tenderloin, pork chops, chorizos, eels, tomatoes, and land snails.

## B) From Valencia to the world

The identity appropriation of paella by the Valencian elite early enabled this dish to experience more diversification: upper classes from Madrid, Barcelona and other important cities of Spain adopted the consumption of paella during outdoor festive events. Their cooks invented particularly plethoric versions of paella. In their vision, rice was logically the basic ingredient of this dish, but it was not always the most important one. They basically thought that paella was a perfect way to cook and to serve many prized meats and seafoods at the same time in an outdoor context. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example, the cook of the Duke of Fernán Núñez included in his paella duck, chicken, eel, spiny lobster, salted codfish, chorizo, pork tenderloin, land snails, crawfishes, frogs’ legs, cauliflower, artichokes, green beans, tomatoes, etc. As French major chefs took up some of these recipes in their cookbooks, this Spanish version of paella began to be known throughout the world during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1868, for instance, Urbain Dubois published a recipe of *Paëlla à l’espagnole* in *Cuisine de tous les pays*, a cookbook reprinted several times.

The dissemination of such representations of paella locally led to the appearance of different versions of this dish. In 1932, French women’s newspaper *La Femme de France* mentioned the presence of oysters and veal or mutton shoulder in tasty paellas made by Parisian experts. In Spain, restaurants classically offered paellas characterised by the abundance of ingredients,

especially animal products. In 1889, Alfred Crouzat ate at the Parador of San Joaquín, in Sagunto (Valencia), a paella that contained chicken, sausage, black pudding, mussels, carpet shells and tomatoes. Sixteen years later, a Madrid restaurant promoted its *Paella con pollo y mariscos* (“Paella with chicken and seafood”) in a local newspaper. De facto, restaurants made their mark during the 20<sup>th</sup> century as important places of diversification and promotion of *paella mixta* (including different ingredients, like vegetables, poultry, meat, seafood...). Numerous establishments were already famous for their own version of this dish in the 1970s. In Xàbia (Jávea), the restaurant Sur offered *Paella a la Granadella* made with meat, prawns and mussels. In Córdoba, one *Paella Yvory* contained chicken, pork tenderloin, monkfish, prawns, squids, green peas, broad beans, tomatoes, green peppers, etc.

The emigration of people from the Spanish Levante also participated to the spread of paella culture into the world. Of course, the composition of the paella made in Algeria, Argentina, México, Metropolitan France, or other places could differ significantly from the initial ones.

The adoption of paella by the Spanish urban lower and middle classes out of the Mediterranean area also contributed to the diversification of this dish. It was a complex process and its chronology differed from place to place, according to the familiarity of the local population with rice consumption. The making of paella within a familial framework only began in the 1960s-1970s in such northern area as Basque Country or Galicia. Logically, the paella frequently took on local colours in its new territories. When people emigrated from there, they also brought their concept of paella to another place, where some adaptations could be necessary, etc.

A relationship full of paradoxes started to exist between Spanish emigrant communities and paella before the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Logically, the situation in the places where migrants were mainly originated in Levante was sensibly different than elsewhere. For example, a true transplant of Valencian culture occurred in Oran region, French Algeria. Consequently, paella retained there its traditional functions, including this of identity marker. Its local recipes were passed down through generations even after the exodus of Pied-noir communities in 1962-1965. During the colonial period, the identification of Oran with paella was extremely strong. Born in 1921, Roger G. remembered 82 years later in a Toulouse retirement home that “Oran, it was the Spaniards and the paella”.

De facto, it was so strong that the art of making paella survived the departure of the Valencian immigrant descendants. Logically, the cultural context created by the victory of FLN excluded pork products of the local paella ingredient list. But identity investment in paella did not disappear. In June 2015, Tourism and Craft Industry Direction of the Wilaya of Oran organised with the support of local culinary institutions the making of a huge paella. Made with chicken, lamb, squids, and prawns, it was intended to become the biggest paella registered in Guinness World Record, outperforming a paella made by a Valencian company. The operation failed because the contain of the frying-pan caught on fire. Comments expressed when this pathetic failure was announced underlined the identity dimension of the project: sad deception in Oran, sarcasm in Morocco where Oran was firstly an Algerian town.

### C) Paella and Spanishness

Its history converted paella into one of the principal emblems of Spanish cooking. Spaniards who are a bit interested in what they eat cannot accept the simplifying idea that paella is the national dish of Spain; but this idea is considered as true by hundreds of millions of persons throughout the world. At the same time, cooking paella became a common culinary action in

Spain as a whole. Even if they do not look paella as a food linked with their little homeland identity, most Spaniards interested in cuisine have an idea of how making a paella. Consequently, Spanish emigrants frequently choose paella when they need to culinarily emphasize their *Spanishness*. This rice dish can also be used as food lowest common denominator when it is necessary managing activities able to seduce members of an heterogenous Spanish community and, possibly, friends of this community.

Having a good ability to paella-making could help emigrants in their social and economic integration even when Spanish cuisine was mostly seen as a not so interesting exotic cooking. From its beginning in 1929, the Parisian restaurant Barcelona focused its communication on its “*Paella Valenciana*”. Thirty-seven years later, the restaurant that Andrés Cabeza found in the French capital arriving from Zaragoza obtained a good review because his owner made his paella “exactly as in Spain”. Today, Spanish cooks who can prepare honestly a paella are recruited to guarantee the *spanishness* of the cuisine served in fashion restaurants located far away from Valencia, Barcelona or Madrid, in Bahrain, Dubai, Singapore, etc. More personal initiatives also recall that a Spanish chef who like cooking paella can practically work anywhere in the world

#### **D) Paella and Valencian Identity**

In the Valencia area, the art of paella-making became an excessively strong collective identity marker. Local elite played an essential role during the first phase of this process. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example, paella was praised in poems in whose gourmet passion generally merged with the complex interest in local culture that characterised *valencianismo*. De facto, the cultural movement called *Renaixença* played an important role in the construction of paella as an identity marker. In addition to celebrating, it in their texts, the intellectuals who shared the desire to valorise Valencian language and culture strongly associated paella consumption with local high-society events. It was not until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that Valencian working-classes perfectly incorporated the idea that the art of paella-making was an identity marker of their *Pàtria xica* (“little homeland”). The local development of mass-tourism played an essential role in this complex multifactorial phenomenon because led to a hyper identification of Valencia with paella trough postcard publishing, overrepresentation in restaurant offer, festival organisation, etc. As an abstract sculpture inaugurated on the 50<sup>th</sup> edition of the Sueca paella contest perfectly underlined in 2010, paella became a Valencian monument.

During the last decade, local identity affirmation around paella significantly strengthened. Valencia had never been prouder of its emblematic rice dish than during this moment when cooking and gastronomy were globally trendy. There were the foundation of the association Wikipaella to protect and to valorise the recipes of authentic paella in 2013, the efforts to obtain the creation of an emoji *Paella valenciana* in WhatsApp between 2014 and 2016, etc. In October 2021, the Generalitat of Valencia recognised *Paella valenciana* as an Intangible Good of Cultural Interest. The decree insisted on the fact that paella-making was an “art of uniting and sharing”. The road to inscription as intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO has just begun. This official recognition of the fact that paella was a superlative example of “food of association” occurred just after very special times when political reactions to COVID-19 temporally changed perceptions of food sociability in many countries. During this short period, sharing paella could be considered as one of the most shameful pieces of evidence of lack of sense of citizenship. Serving paella in the traditional way could mean committing an offence.

This context was very favourable to a strong development of paella delivery offer in numerous places, included the town of Valencia. Time will tell if it was only a circumstantial phenomenon. One thing is for sure: the resurgence of the possibility to share lawfully paella was a symbol that life came back to normality wherever this dish was a notable element in the local food panorama before the crisis

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Fig.1.



Fig.2.



Fig.3.



Fig.4.